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TRAINING CHILDREN TO READ GOOD LITERATURE

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The high-school teachers of English are constantly criticizing the work of the elementary school, two of their principal criticisms being that the pupils who come from it have no taste for good literature and little knowledge that can be used as a working basis in high-school English. When we note the nature of the reading done by most of the children in the elementary school, we can easily believe that teachers are justified in making these criticisms. Pupils in school read only the best, but outside they are satisfied with poorly written books, given them by well-meaning parents and friends, and with harmless but light books, chosen from the public library. Some are too indifferent to read anything.

Many elementary teachers are well aware of this state of affairs, but are at a loss how to remedy it. Some think that they have found a solution to the problem when they post in the classroom a classified list of books, available at the library and adapted to the needs of the class. This is only a step in the right direction. Children who would like to read the books listed are often unable to find them alone and timid about asking the aid of the librarian. Meeting with this difficulty, they soon become discouraged and are indifferent to the posted list. Other pupils who dislike reading give no heed to it.

Therefore, if we wish our children to cultivate a taste for good literature, we must see to it that they not only know what books to read, but that they read them and desire others as good. As it is far easier to say this than it is to achieve it, I am going to outline briefly some methods which, during this last year, as a fifth- and sixth-grade teacher, I found helpful in stimulating my children to read. The class numbered thirty-eight pupils who, with the exception of a few, enjoyed reading, but who were doing very little, if any, outside of school.

First of all, I made out a list of good juvenile books, available at the library, and listed them under the heads of fiction, history, geography, and science. Then, with the idea of teaching the pupils how to find at the library the books they wanted, I told them a little about the classification of books and explained how subject-matter determined their place on library shelves. The pupils then named some books which they had read in school and told in what section they would expect to find them if they went to the library. I suggested that, for outside work, those who wished to do so might make a classified list of all the books they had read, and I said that we would talk over the lists together.

After they had grasped the scheme of classification, I agreed to meet at the library every Friday evening all who wished my help in getting books. I advised them to take along a copy of our posted list. At first a small number came, but among them were children obtaining library cards for the first time. I showed them the arrangement of the books. Then they sought for the ones they wanted.

After two meetings of this sort, I observed that, with the exception of a few, the children were drawing fiction only. When I pointed out books on history and science with the suggestion that they draw them, they shook their heads and said that they liked stories best. This prejudice presented a problem that demanded attention. I finally decided to attempt its solution by correlating as much of their reading as possible with subjects studied at school and, in addition to the help that I was giving at the library, to start a small circulating library in the schoolroom. By means of the latter I would have close at hand the books I wished read, and they would be accessible when I needed them for class use. I told the librarian my plans, and she kindly allowed me to draw, at any time I desired to do so, several books for a prolonged period. When these were added to some of my own, we had a usable collection by the aid of which I could carry out my correlation idea.

For instance, when Mexico and Peru were studied, books telling about the explorations of Cortes and Pizarro were on the shelves, also geographical books containing interesting information on the countries under discussion. I read aloud selections from them,

with the result that the pupils wished to draw them. Again, when Switzerland was the subject of study, *Heidi*, *Moni the Goat Boy*, and books on life and travel in Switzerland appeared and were eagerly sought.

The sixth-grade United States history work called for historical fiction, such as *The Green Mountain Boys*, *A Little Girl of Old Quebec*, *A Little Maid of Boston Town*, and *Young Puritans in King Philip's Day*; for pure history, such as *The Thirteen Colonies*, *Our Great Republic*, and *The Indians of Early New England*; and for biography. The children were encouraged to supplement all their history lessons with information gained from the correlated reading.

Stories meant more to the class when the school work furnished a background than they would have meant if they had been read at a less opportune time. For example, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *The Story of the Britons*, *When Knights Were Bold*, and tales relating to the Arthurian legends had a special significance because they were read at the time the class was studying the early history of England. At Thanksgiving time, the sixth grade wrote a Pilgrim play and called for every available book which would throw any light upon the life and customs of the Pilgrims.

As the fifth grade studied Greek history and read in their reading class *Wigwam Stories*, I had a fine opportunity for working in books which deal with myths. At one time there were twenty-five mythological books in circulation.

Sometimes both grades were interested in the same books at the same time. For instance, when the fifth grade was reading *Wigwam Stories*, the sixth happened to be studying in their United States history the Colonial wars. Both classes were interested in the Indian tribes and asked many questions about them. Therefore I thought *The Leatherstocking Tales* might appeal to them. They read abridged forms, and I read selections to them from the complete ones. One boy, more mature than the other children, found at the library Cooper's *Sea Tales* and read some of them.

Naturally the books treating of science were read in connection with the nature lessons. Bird books were very popular, as well as such books as *A Boy with the U.S. Foresters* and *A Boy with the*

U.S. Fisheries. One of my chief difficulties was that the number of books was not adequate to the demand.

Like all children, unless trained otherwise, the pupils considered subject-matter only, and gave no heed to authors. Knowing that if they neglected this feature of their reading they would be handicapped all through their later work in English, I did what I could to aid them in remembering the names of authors and their works. Naturally I put stress only on well-known names, such as, Kipling, Stevenson, Stockton, Alcott, Hawthorne, Mabie, and Cooper. As a means of assistance in fixing names in the minds of the class, I devised a few simple exercises like the following:

Frequently, a few minutes in the day were taken for asking such questions as these: Who wrote *Little Women*? What other books did Louise Alcott write? What other books were written by the author of *Tanglewood Tales*? Who wrote the *Just So Stories*? What new authors have you learned this week?

Sometimes lists of authors and titles were placed on the board, and the exercise was carried out somewhat in this fashion: A child passed to the board, selected an author's name, and then designated all the titles of books written by him. Perhaps the next pupil selected all the names of authors and named a book by each one.

At other times a single list of authors and one of titles appeared, and members of the class asked questions of another member who stood at the board. Sometimes a pupil remained standing until he made a mistake, when he was replaced by another. Often the exercise was varied by letting a pupil erase a name or title when he gave the desired information concerning it.

Frequently tests on subject-matter were given orally, at either the board or the seat. Pupils enjoyed answering questions like the following: What sort of stories is found in Kipling's *Just So Stories*? Who are the three heroes in Kingsley's *Greek Heroes*? What other books have stories in them concerning these same heroes? What books can you name that contain stories of animal life? What books have stories in them about knights?

Still another exercise was one in which the pupils told in what books certain characters are found. They were widely selected, being such names as Gareth, Samson, Will Scarlet, Elaine, Siegfried,

Amy March, Roland, Balder, Jason, and Griselda. Sometimes I did not name the character, but told things about him and let the class guess whom I had in mind.

The writing-lesson furnished a means for reviewing such work as I have just described. If I desired an exercise on capitals, the class took a sentence after this order: Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *The Wonder Book*, which contains stories of Greek myths. At other times they made lists of names and titles.

Whenever possible, pictures connected with the reading-matter were used. For example, when the class was reading myths, I had placed on a wall space several large colored pictures drawn by Maxfield Parrish and illustrating such subjects as Circe, Atlas, and Pandora. I might say that the pictures were obtained from numbers of *Collier's Weekly*. Some of Wyeth's and Remington's Indian scenes were also used to a good advantage. By means of the picture device the class incidentally learned that Howard Pyle was a prominent illustrator as well as a writer. Pictures, too, were used to acquaint pupils with the portraits and homes of authors, and with scenes and points of interest in their stories.

All of the devices described stimulated the class to read, but the little circulating library was the device which proved most effective. It not only was a means for securing broad and systematic reading, but it was an invaluable agent in getting the children interested who were indifferent toward reading. Before and often after school there was a group around the shelves, looking at pictures and discussing the books. Indifferent pupils became interested in stories haltingly reproduced by their comrades, and desired to read them for themselves.

When a book was not as popular as I wished it to be, I removed it from the shelves and read aloud from it for a few days, until the children showed interest and asked to draw it. Whenever a book was returned, I examined it and if it showed defacement I removed it from the shelves, explaining to the class the cause for its removal. It is needless to say that, when a book was popular, the class did not like to have it disappear and took pains to handle all books with care.

Of course all these ways and means made work for the teacher, but the results repaid me in full measure. Children discovered treasures at home which they had allowed to stand neglected on the shelves; in some cases parents became interested and bought classics which their children desired; and, best of all, several pupils who, at the beginning of the year, had not cared to read were, at the close, going regularly to the library and making good selections.

When our work was finished, each pupil handed in a list of the books that he had read, classified under the heads of fiction, history, geography, and science. On the average each child had read fifteen books. Only one had not read any. Some had read too many. I tried to discourage superficial reading, and frequently called on pupils who I thought were drawing too many books to give reviews of them.

If one year of work will do so much toward training children into right habits of reading, we can easily foresee the results that would be secured if every teacher in the last four grades of the elementary school would persistently stimulate her classes to read broadly and systematically the best books. It would follow that pupils who go to high school would show a keener appreciation in their English and would possess a better working knowledge, not only for that subject, but for history and science. Furthermore, those who do not go beyond the elementary school would have their literary taste well developed.